Slide 1

Why is there an octothorpe in this data?

On preserving technological and social forms used in social media

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Slide 2

If you are not familiar with an octothorpe…

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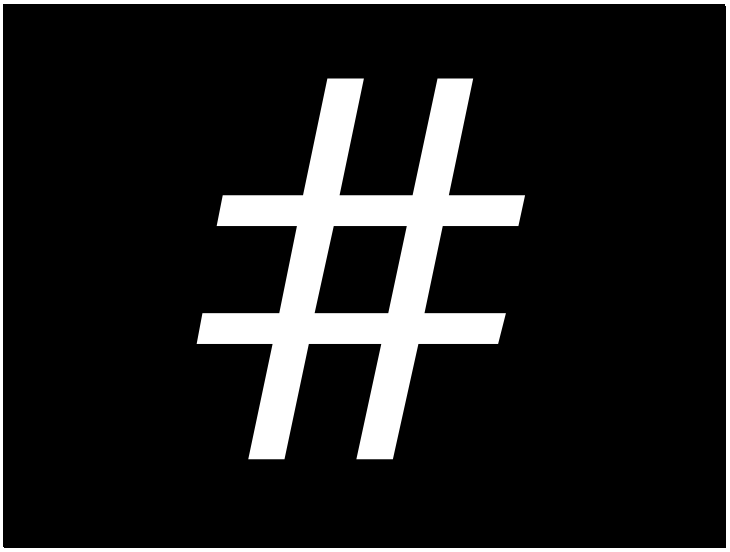
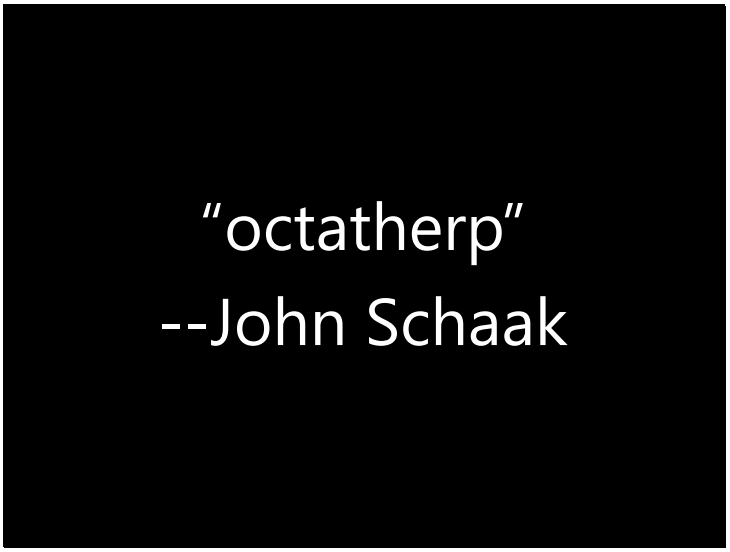


It’s one of these.

Slide 4

The spelling – and the origin - of the term isn’t clear.

Slide 5



Douglas Kerr of Bell Labs claims it was invented by John Schaak of AT&T. AS A JOKE. They needed a name for …

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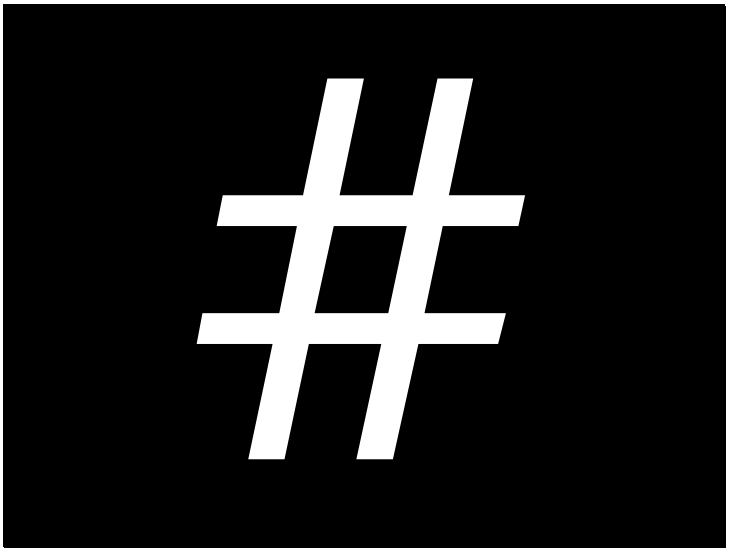
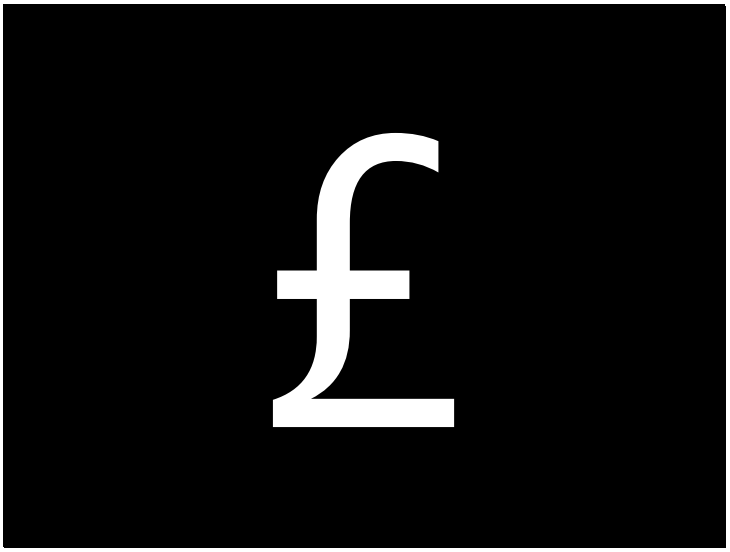


THIS, for touch-tone dialing, but they didn't want to call it the pound sign, since that made the British think of…

Slide 7



THIS.

Slide 8

Ralph Carsen of Bell Labs claims that Bell supervisor Don MacPherson invented it while training staff at the Mayo clinic to use the new touch-tone system.

Slide 9

Don chose “octo” for the eight points of the symbol and Thorpe for…

Slide 10

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jim_Thorpe_Canton_Bulldogs_1915-20.png
Public domain

Jim Thorpe. Don was a fan.

Slide 11

I am not sure how that is supposed to relate to a symbol on a phone keypad.

Slide 12

What I find fascinating about this octothorpe story is that it supposedly happened in…

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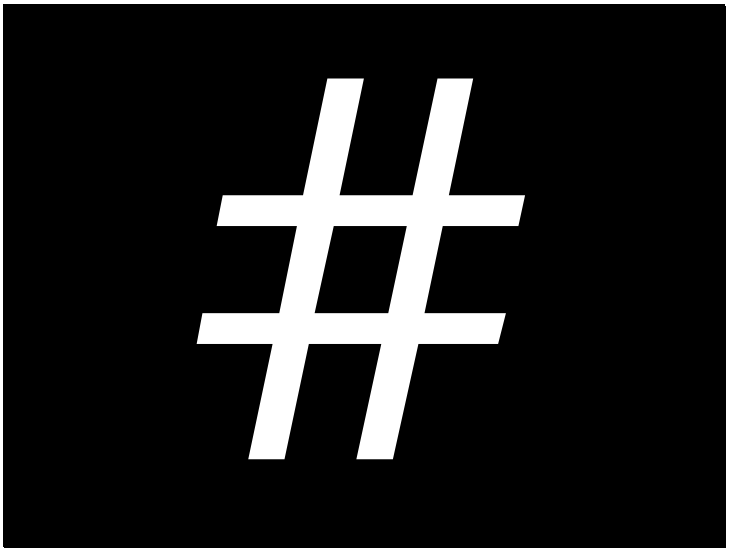
1963. So here we are, with a story about something as ubiquitous as…

Slide 14



The octothorpe, and we don’t really know what happened. We have two different stories. And we’re now sending…

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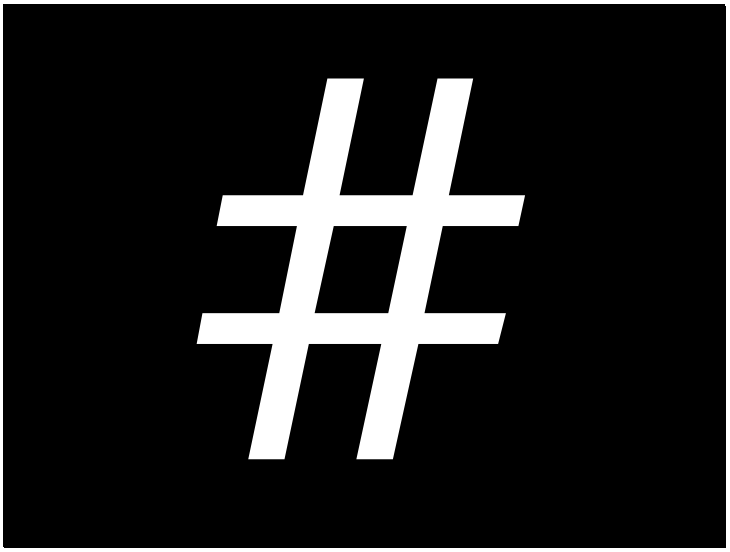
200 billion tweets per year.

Slide 16



And we've been using the hashtag…

Slide 17

since August 23, 2007.

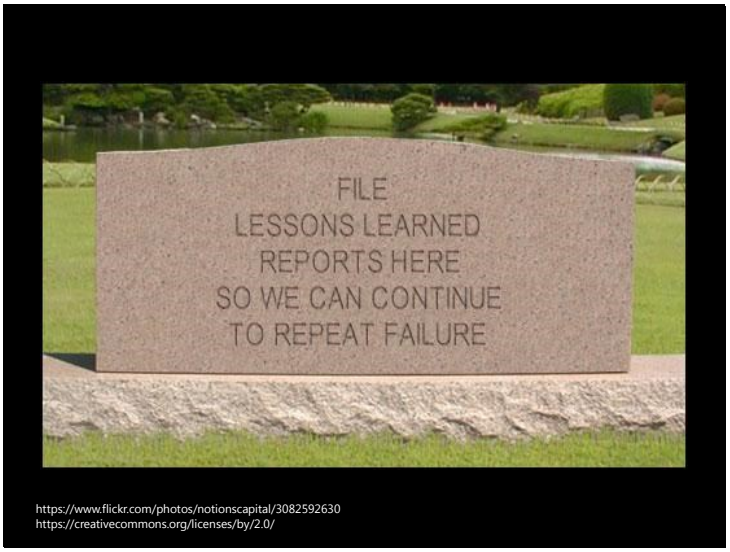
Slide 18

We’re pretty terrible about recording things as they happen, and it’s hard to get information after the fact.

Slide 19

We know this. It's why we're here.

Slide 20



This presentation grew out of my interest in technology and information loss. We are storing and capturing more stuff than ever, and yet it seems that the threat of loss is only increasing.

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Let’s look at the technology of the photograph. My family can identify three people here, and none of them are the bride or groom.

Slide 22

We can identify a few more in this photo.

Slide 23

It takes nothing more advanced than the technology of a pen to write down the names of people in a photo.

Slide 24

But missing information in photos IS about technology. I suspect that early photography subjects didn't record names, simply because they knew everyone in the photo.

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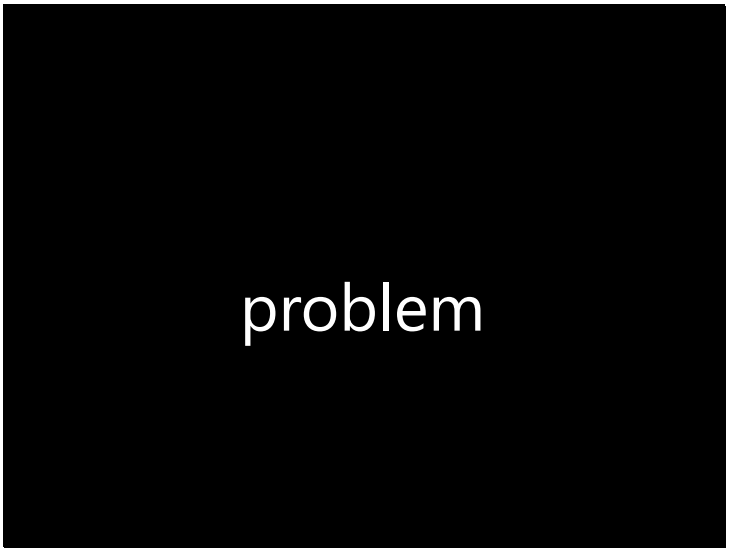
Only later did it become clear that unlabeled photos were a problem.

Slide 26



A PROBLEM…

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Caused by a TECHNOLOGY…

Slide 28

that made it easier to CAPTURE THE MOMENT.

Slide 29

Oh boy.

The unlabeled photo problem is getting worse now that we…

Slide 30

“firehose” photos, so we can’t even imagine labeling all of them. We have replaced the process of…

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labeling photos with the process…

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of feeling GUILTY about NOT labeling photos.

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Of course, there is a certain amount of information we can glean from this photo without knowing everyone in it. You might think that losing SOME information doesn't make this completely meaningless.

Slide 34

But what I'm worried about is something like this. THIS is the unlabeled photo of today. Six hashtags, two of which I don't understand.

SIX of which probably won't make any sense at all ten years from now.

Another example…

Slide 35

#winning was Charlie Sheen’s hashtag when he claimed he was on top of the world…

Slide 36

and he didn't really LOOK like he was. So people use it like this:

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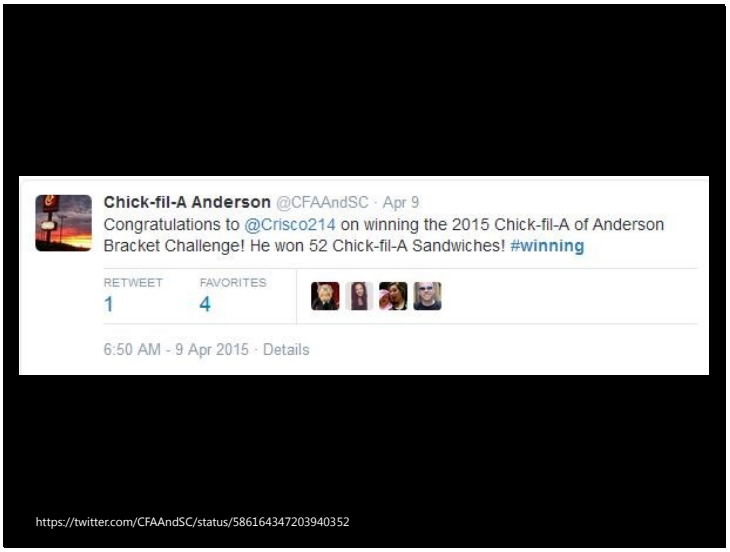
cloe @cloexstyles · Mar 16
Everyone has the motivation to look all nice this week and here I am coming to school with wet hair and sweatpants #winning
RETWEET
1
FAVORITES
5
6:40 AM - 16 Mar 2015 · Details
https://twitter.com/cloexstyles/status/577464433884164096

“Everyone has the motivation to look all nice this week and here I am coming to school with wet hair and sweatpants. #winning”

Slide 38

Only now it looks like most people use it another way:

Slide 39


Chick-fil-A Anderson @CFAAndSC · Apr 9
Congratulations to @Crisco214 on winning the 2015 Chick-fil-A of Anderson Bracket Challenge! He won 52 Chick-fil-A Sandwiches! #winning
RETWEET
1
FAVORITES
4
6:50 AM - 9 Apr 2015 · Details
https://twitter.com/CFAAndSC/status/586164347203940352

When the tweet is about winning something. In this case, winning 52 Chick-fil-a sandwiches. Another example…

Slide 40

“Hashtag sarcasm” – used in speech or written communication. Which is apparently funnier than saying, “I was being sarcastic”.

Slide 41

As an aside, “octothorpe sarcasm” just doesn’t roll off the tongue the same way.

In any case, my concern is that…

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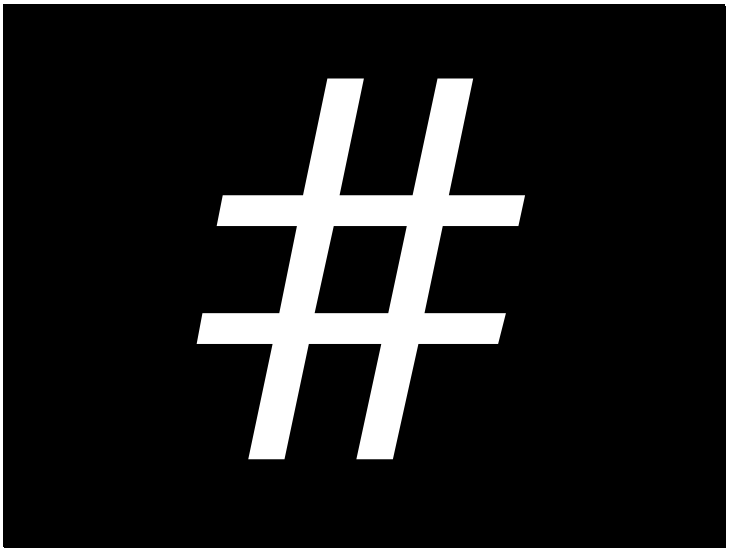
the archivists and researchers of the future will not have the information and context we have today, and they will wonder…

Slide 43



“Why is there an octothorpe in this data?” Or – more realistically…

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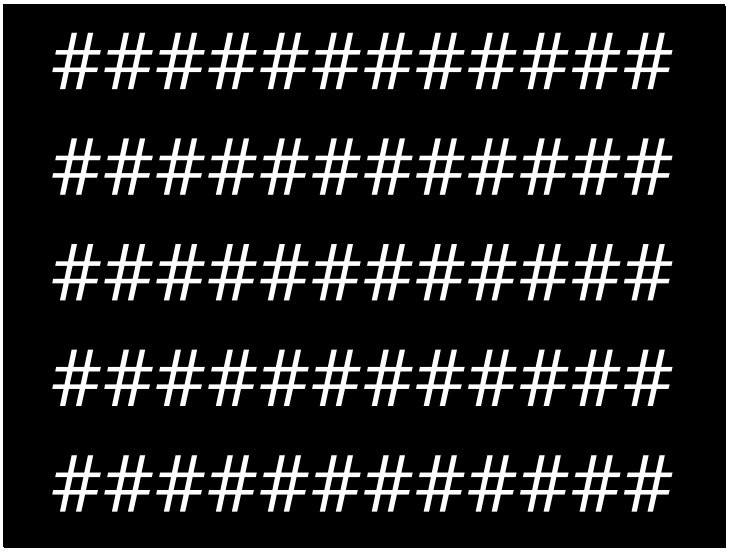
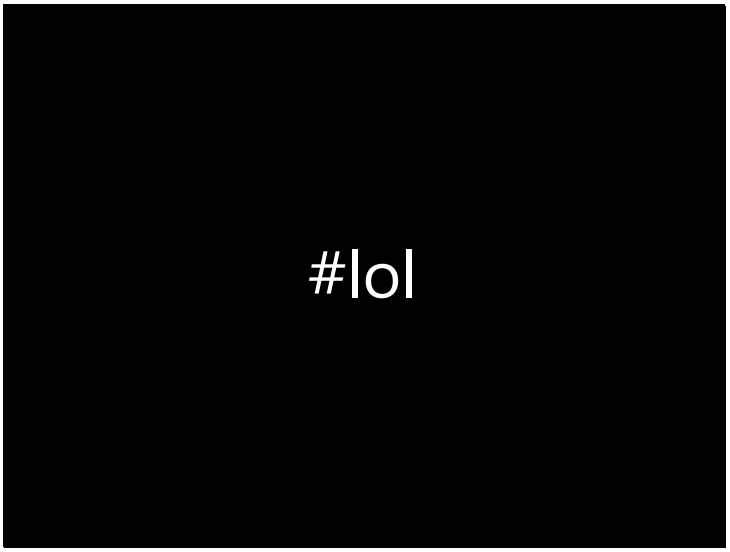


“What are all of these octothorpes doing in this data? What do these keywords MEAN?”

Slide 45



And it’s not so much that they’ll just be missing a gloss on what they are reading, if they don’t know.

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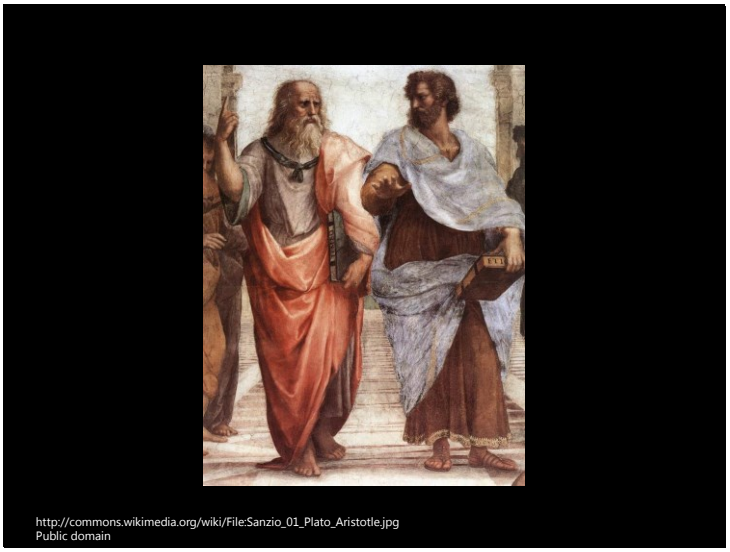
They might miss the meaning entirely. They will lack context. It’s not only about octothorpes, either. We risk losing so much.

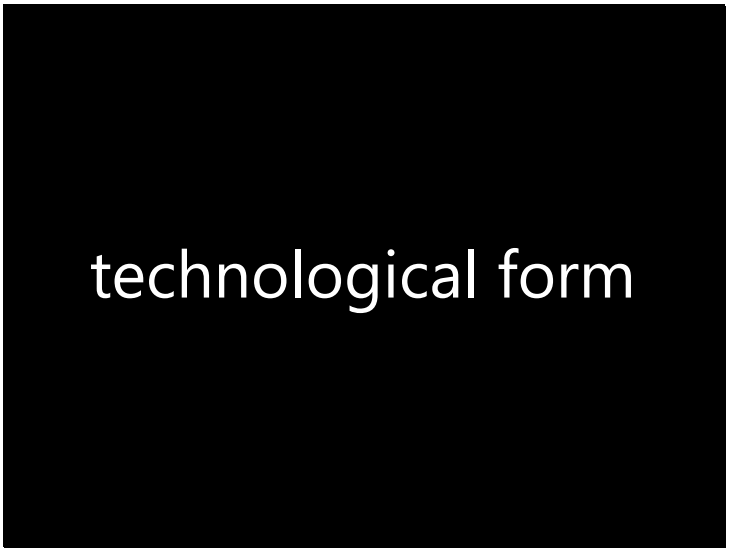
In order to understand the problem, we’re going to have to talk about…

Slide 47



Forms. Specifically, the social and technological forms of personal archives.

Slide 48



Technological form includes features of the platform such as…

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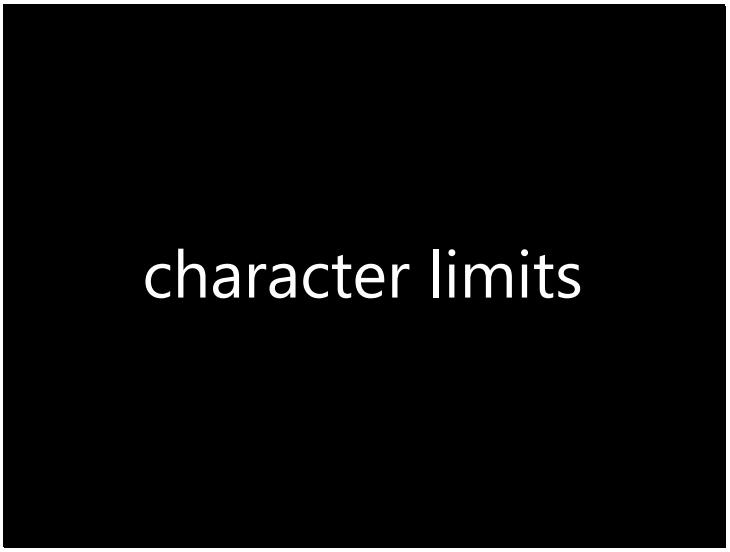
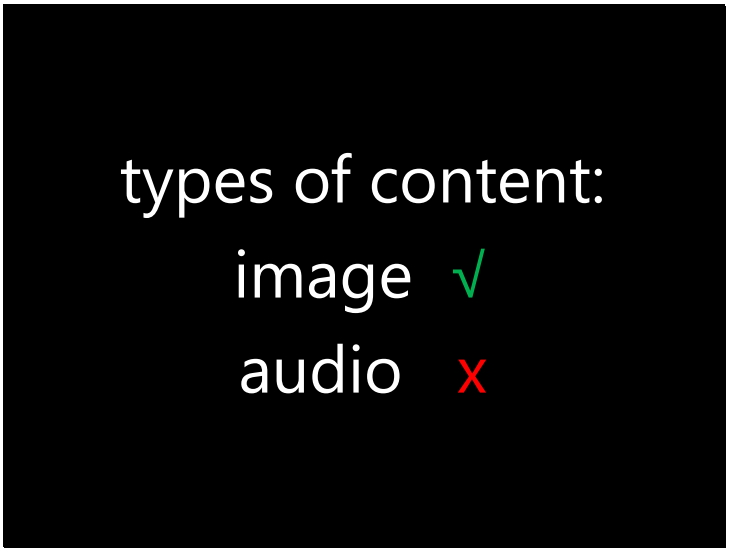


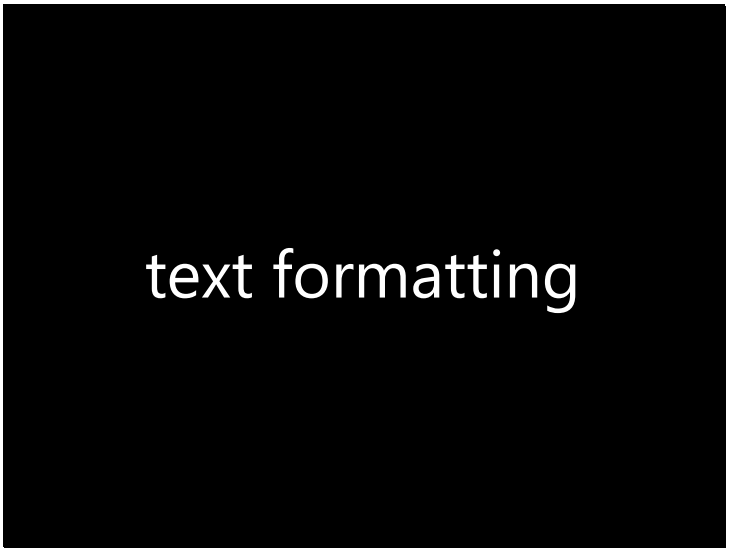
character limits…

Slide 50



the ability to use certain types of content – for example, the ability to add images but not audio…

Slide 51



– or other built-in requirements for content like the ability to use only plain text and not italics, bold, and underlining.

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You can’t italicize your Facebook status, for instance.

Slide 53

Social form, on the other hand, refers to the form that is not necessarily inherent in the media itself. Instead…

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it grows out of the practices of the community of users.

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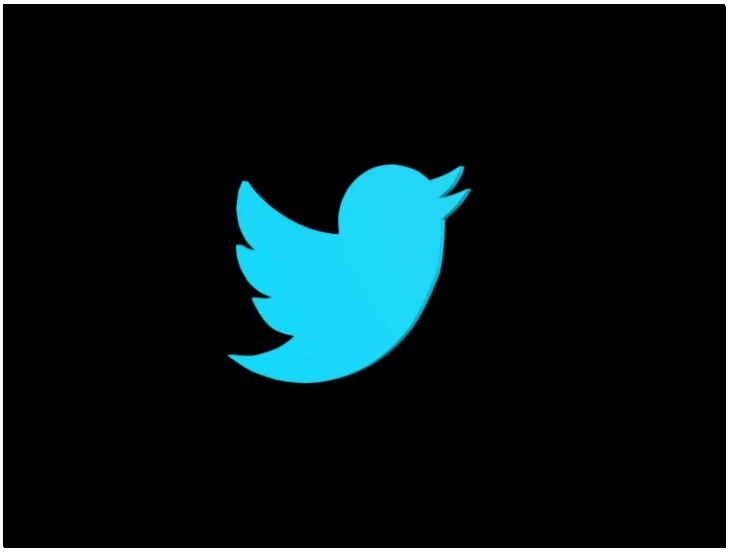

Twitter restricts tweets to 140 characters. This technological form certainly influences the kind of content we find in tweets, leading, for example, to concerns that the short writing style will bring about the…

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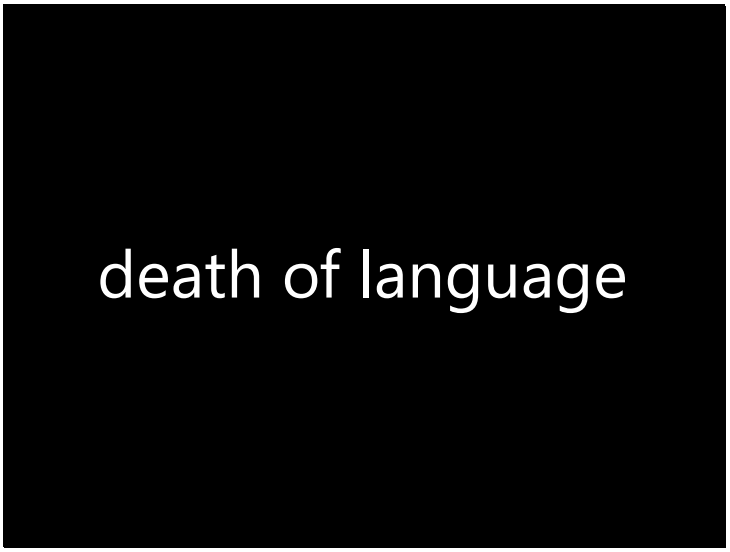
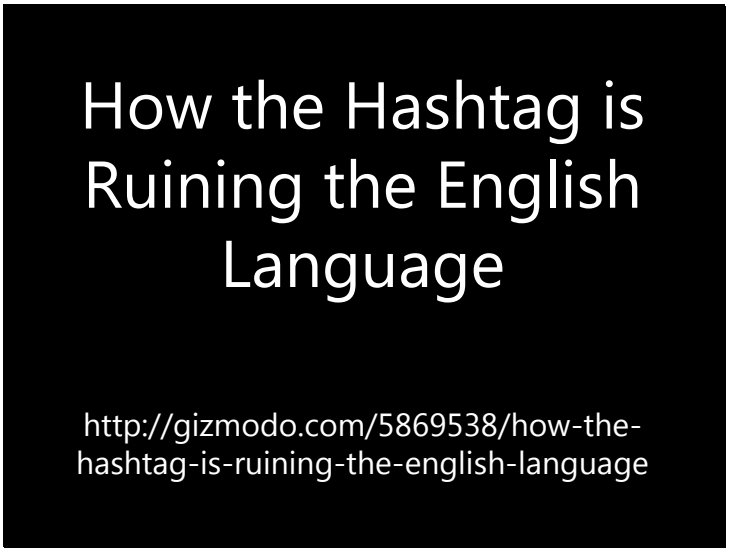


Death of language. Or that the…

Slide 57


How the Hashtag is Ruining the English Language
http://gizmodo.com/5869538/how-the-hashtag-is-ruining-the-english-language

hashtag is ruining the English language

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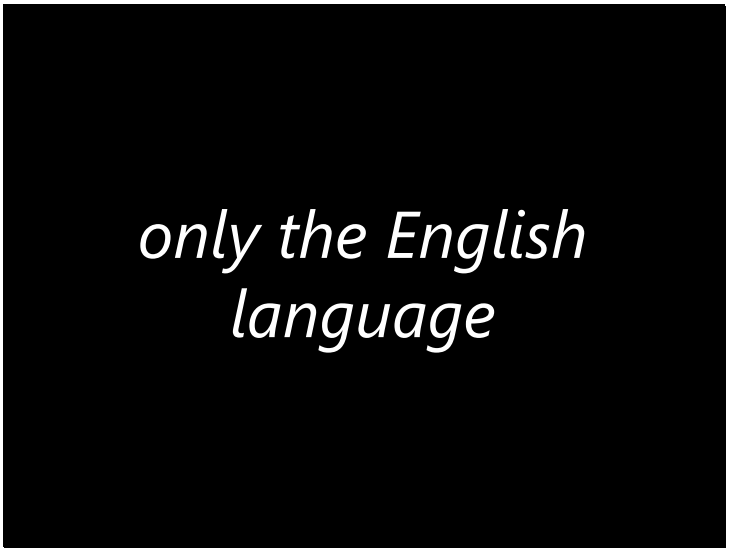

Thankfully, that article claims it's only ruining the English language. That was a close one.

But let's face it, hashtags can be…

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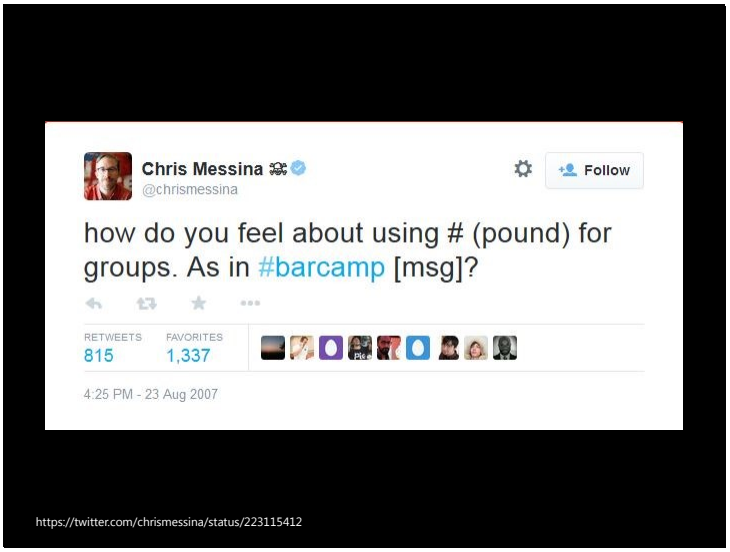
#hilarious

Slide 60



The first tweet was published in 2006, but the hashtag was not part of the technological form of Twitter. The hashtag didn't come into use until August 23, 2007, when Twitter user Chris Messina proposed using it to provide a way to bring together related messages about an event.

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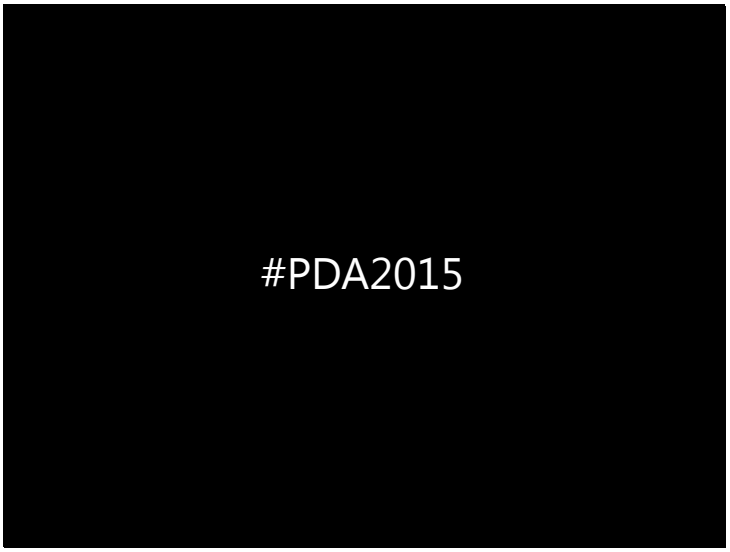
Using hashtags on Twitter
Definition: The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages.
https://support.twitter.com/articles/49309-using-hashtags-on-twitter#

Only later did it become part of the official technological form of Twitter.

Slide 62



From there, it’s grown from tying related messages together, to many other uses.

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It’s often used for making a joke…

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or doing a stage whisper. That is, users have taken the form of keyword-tagging tweets and invented all sorts of language games to play with them.

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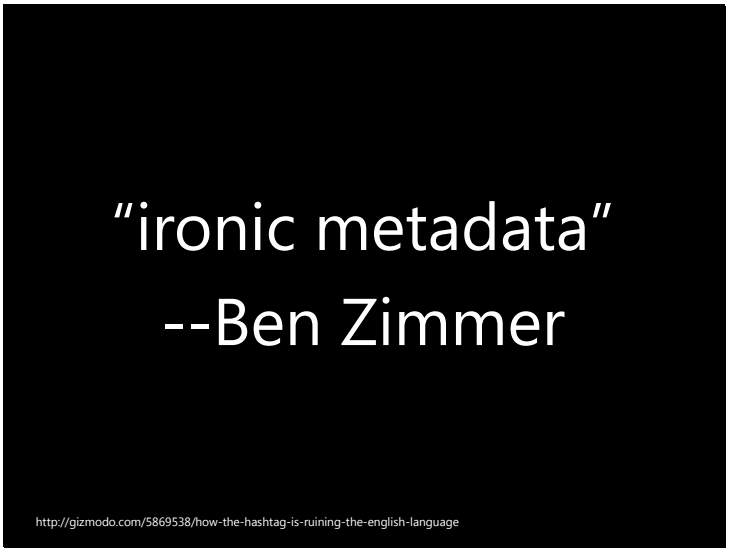

This is what linguist Ben Zimmer calls “ironic metadata”.

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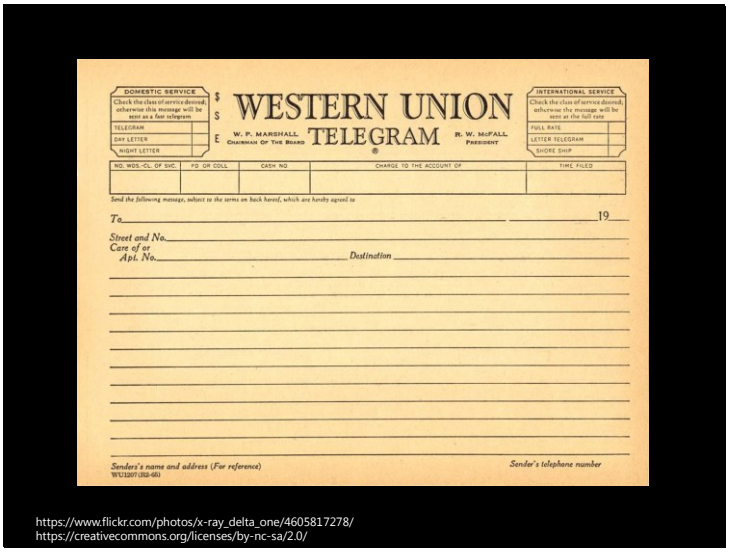

https://www.flickr.com/photos/x-ray_delta_one/4605817278/
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/

This is not the first time we've made jokes by playing with technological form. As an example, in M*A*S*H*, when Hawkeye Pierce's father is wrongly informed that Hawkeye is dead, Hawkeye sends him a telegram: Dear Dad, I am not dead. STOP. Hope you are the same. STOP. Thinking of selling my clubs? STOP. Spending my insurance money? STOP.

[Season 4, Episode 4: The Late Captain Pierce, October 3, 1975]

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There are other examples of how technological form gives rise to social form, and vice versa.

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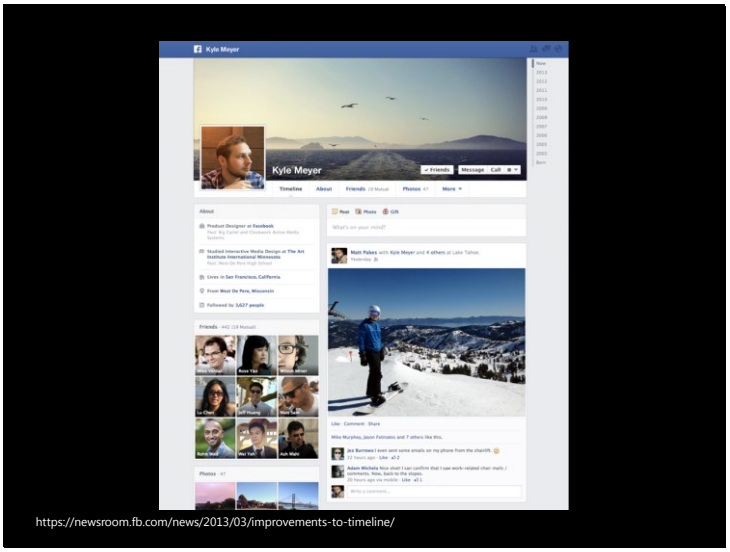

Facebook initially displayed posts on a user's wall simply like a blog, with the new posts appearing above the old ones. If you posted about your graduation, and then your friends…

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posted funny cat pictures on your wall, the cat pictures would be at the top of your wall, and other users might miss your graduation announcement.

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Facebook's Timeline feature allows users to post about significant events in a way that gives them priority over other posts.

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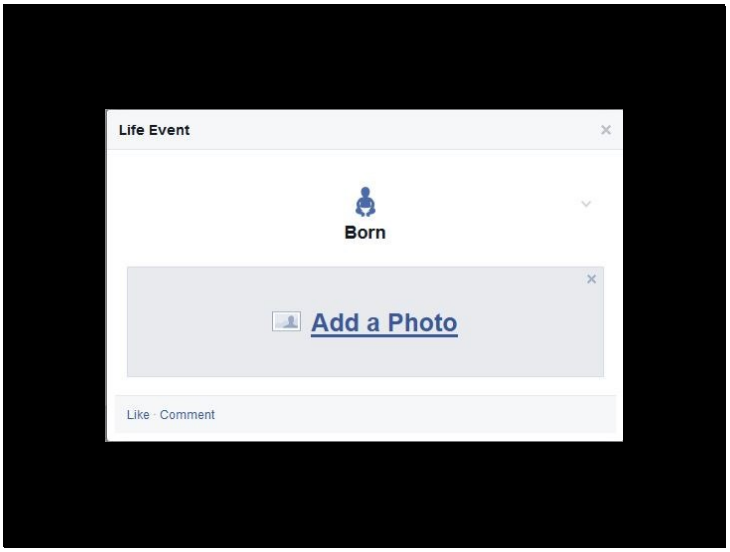

Additionally, unlike with the physical scrapbook, it’s easy to post about events out of order. Here is an option for creating a timeline event for the day I was born.

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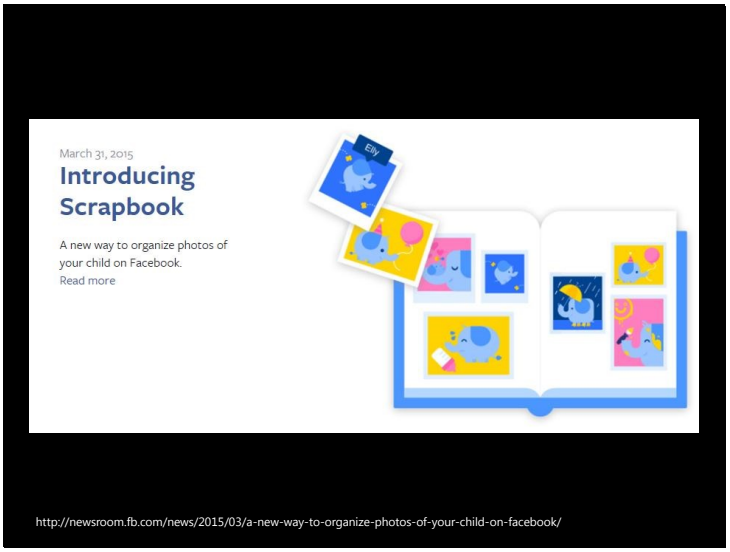

I was amused by this recent announcement of the ‘scrapbook’ feature, which is meant to organize photos of your child in a collage. Facebook Timeline has already taken the idea of the scrapbook and expanded on it in so many ways.

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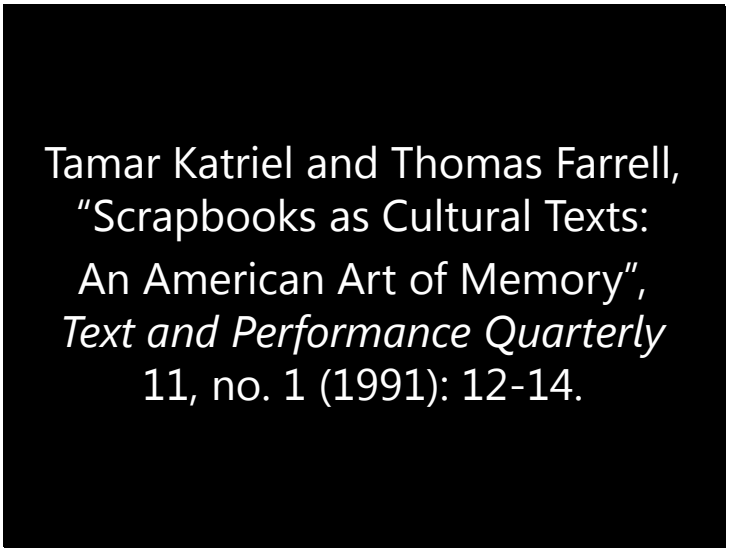
Tamar Katriel and Thomas Farrell,
"Scrapbooks as Cultural Texts:
An American Art of Memory",
Text and Performance Quarterly
11, no. 1 (1991): 12-14.

Tamar Katriel and Thomas Farrell talk about the ways that we use physical scrapbooks. Because of the collage aesthetic of scrapbook pages, scrapbook creators tend to sit with others and provide explanations and stories about the content and the design of each page.

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Katriel and Farrell explain that some scrapbook creators are very much against the idea of letting anyone view their scrapbooks without their guidance. You just don't hand a scrapbook over to someone else and let them interpret it their own way.

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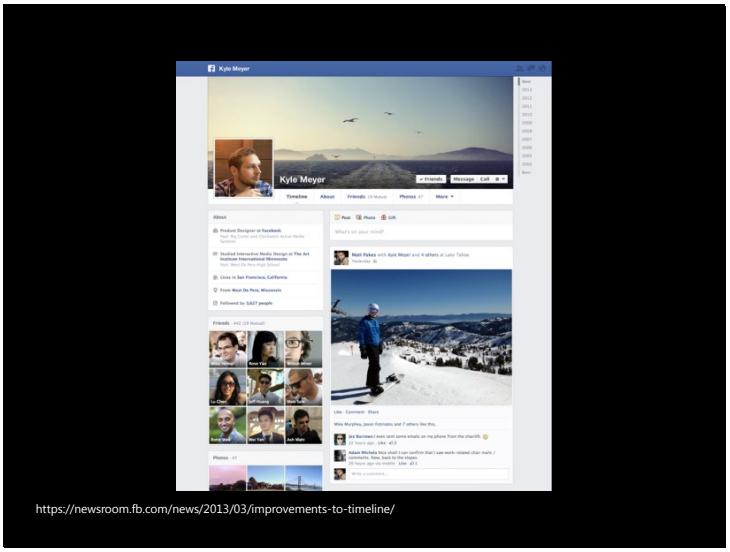

One of the ways that Facebook helps us, then, is by standardizing the layout of the scrapbook. You get a fill-in-the-blank approach to sharing information about yourself. The Timeline feature uses technological form to constrain the social form of the scrapbook, making it easier to share significant events with others, with no interpretation necessary.

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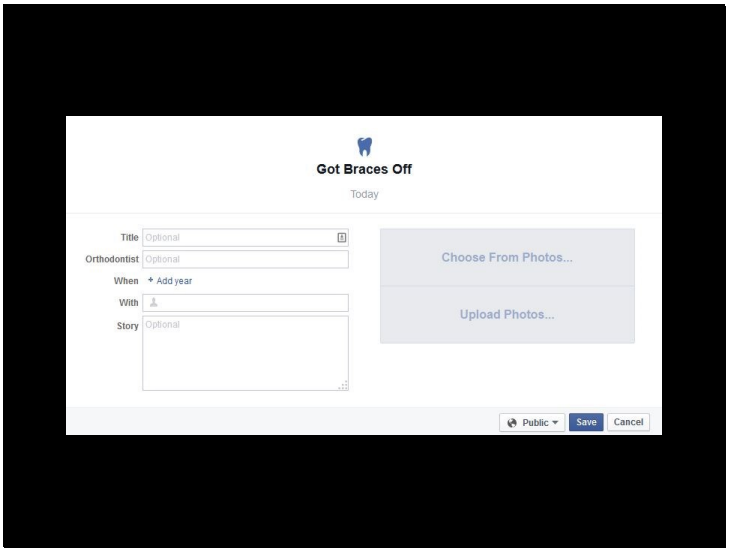

This Timeline event is for when I got my braces off. You don’t need to interpret anything to understand that.

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Yet in other areas of Facebook, there are social forms that are common that are not required by the technological form. Since Facebook IS social, involving input from, and communication with, our friends, it is not only a place to record events and communicate. There is a performance aspect to…

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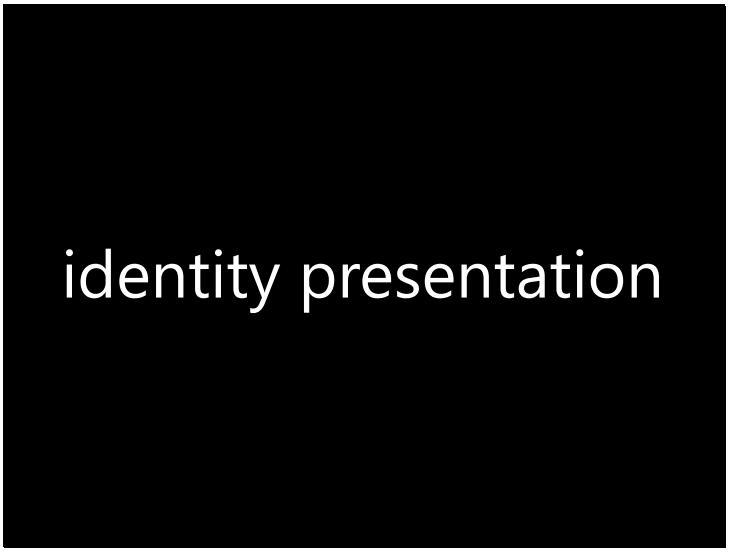

identity presentation that is perhaps stronger than one would find in diaries or scrapbooks. In traditional diaries and scrapbooks, created by and mostly for, one person, the thought of other people viewing the content was pretty remote. In this social environment, my SELF is immediately read by others. My Timeline events may be just factual, since it's a fill-in-the-blank approach, but my wall posts can't be too…

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whiny or depressing. They have to be…

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funny or at least interesting. I've known people to unfollow other users who are too…

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sad or angry or otherwise not fun. Also, with many users, there seems to be a tacit agreement that Facebook posts should be…

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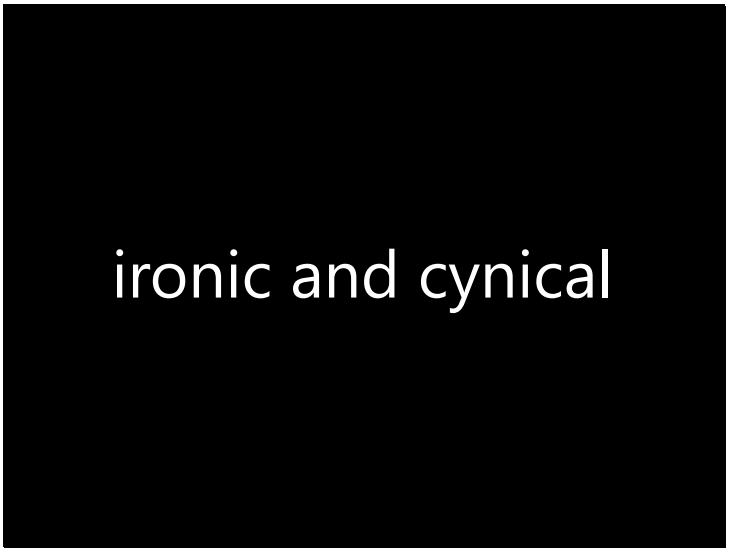

ironic and cynical. David Foster Wallace said irony and cynicism are seen as a measure of…

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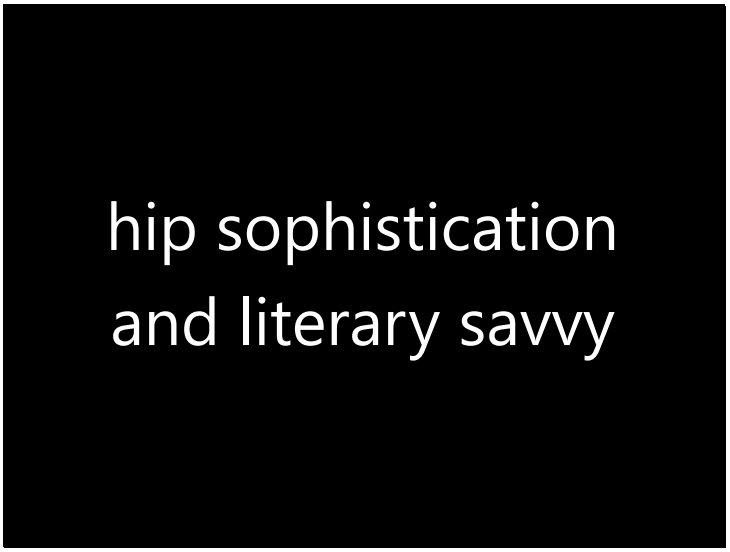

hip sophistication and literary savvy.

[Wallace, David Foster, with Larry McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace”, in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, edited by Stephen J. Burn. University Press of Mississippi, 2012, p. 48.]

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He also says that irony has gone from liberating to enslaving.

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This is why I get fed up with seemingly competitive crafting of Facebook posts about once a year and delete my account.

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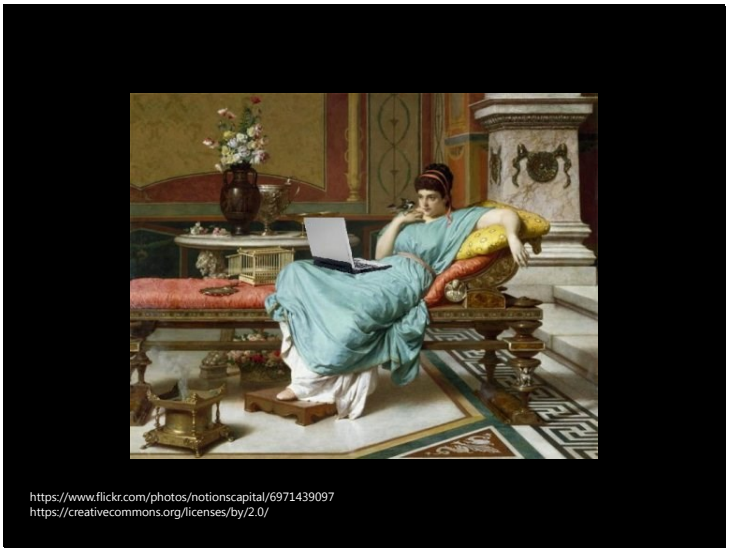
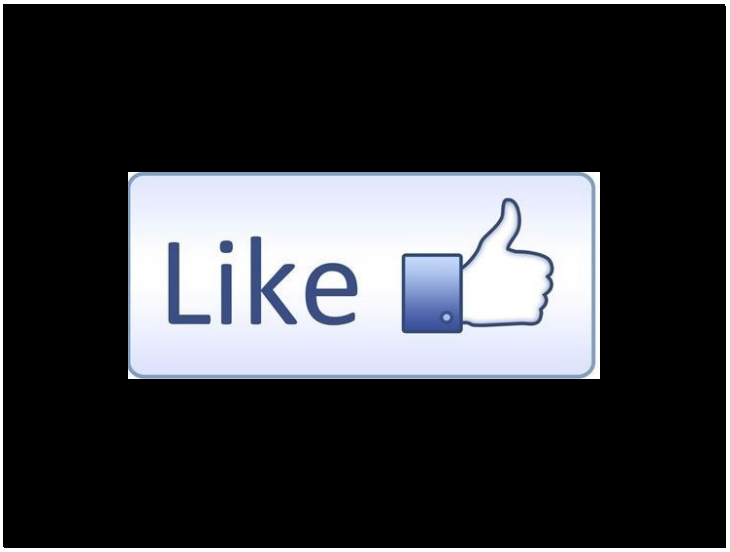


How will our descendants and researchers of the future know that they are reading irony and sarcasm and cynicism? Think about how badly that kind of humor can fail in email. When faced with this data, what will they be able to understand?

Slide 87

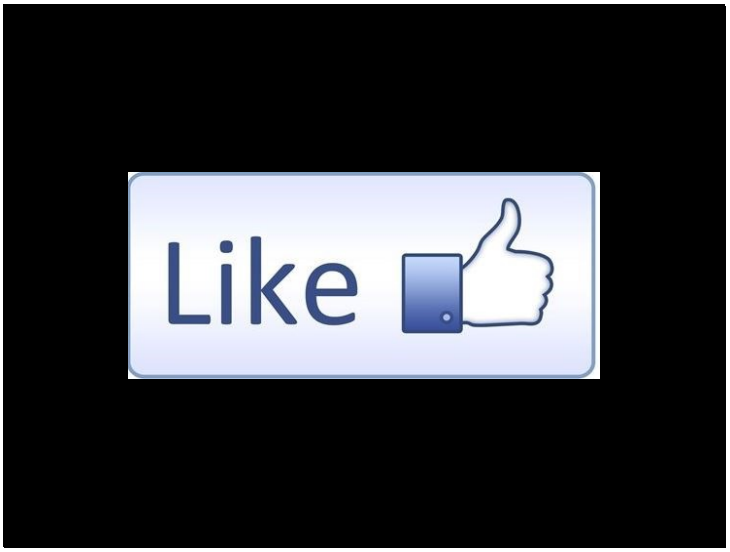


Another example of social form going beyond the technological form is in our use of the “like” button. I still don’t know what to do when someone announces a death on Facebook, but many users will “like” the post. ‘Liking’ a post makes it more prominent to your friends. If I ‘like’ your post, more of your friends will see that you have suffered this loss. AND they’ll see that I’m a good person offering my support in your time of need. By clicking on a button.

Slide 88

At first, I noticed people would apologize in the comments for using the ‘like’ button in that instance. They explained that they wanted to show support.

Slide 89



Now, I see those apologies less frequently. Now we just…

Slide 90

LIKE the fact that your dog died. Will we look like…

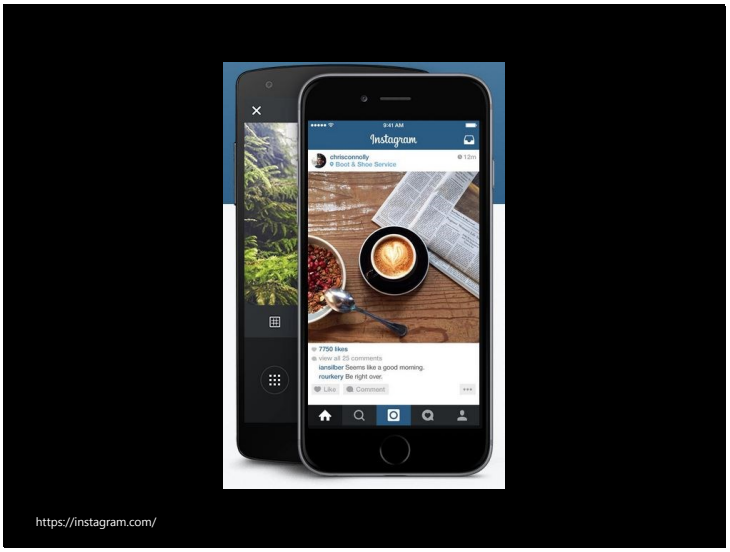
Slide 91

barbarians to researchers of the future?

Slide 92

Google Plus gets this right with their unsentimental “plus one” button. The other thing they got right are the sharing Circles. That is all.

Slide 93

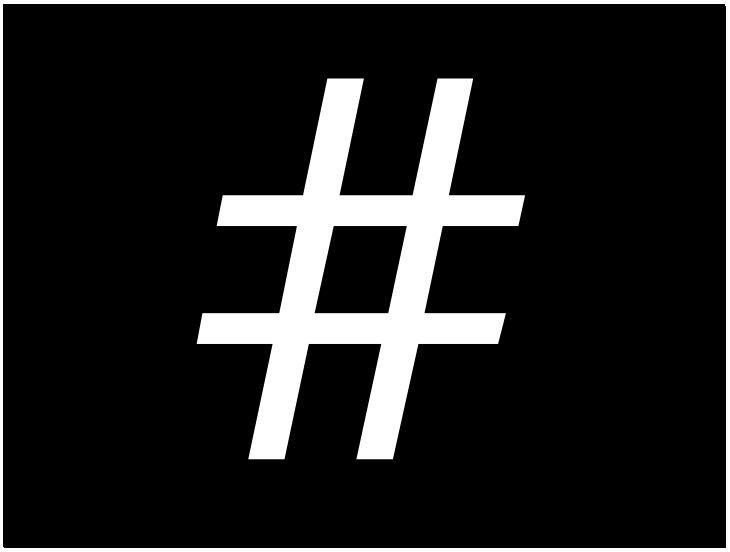


Instagram is so much more image-centered than Twitter or Facebook that it seems that the threat of information loss is a bigger problem here, even though we act as though photos are the best way to capture a moment.

Slide 94

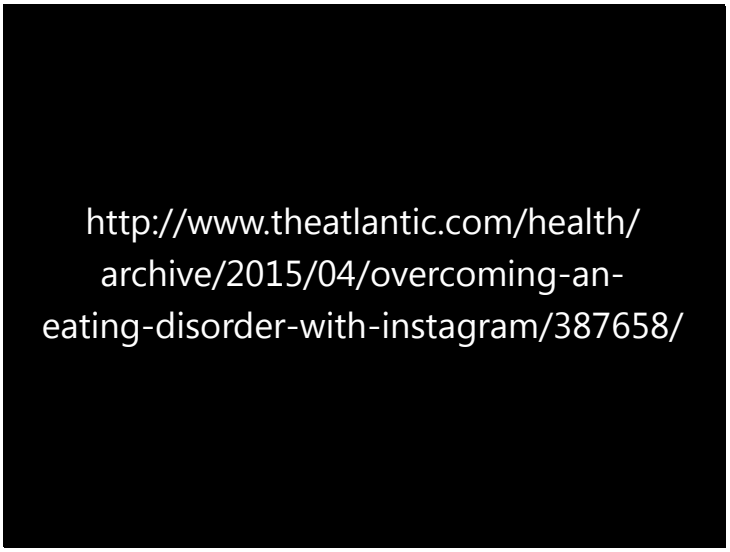
It’s not even the traditional problem of unlabeled photos that I’m thinking of here.

Slide 95



It’s the octothorpe again.

Slide 96

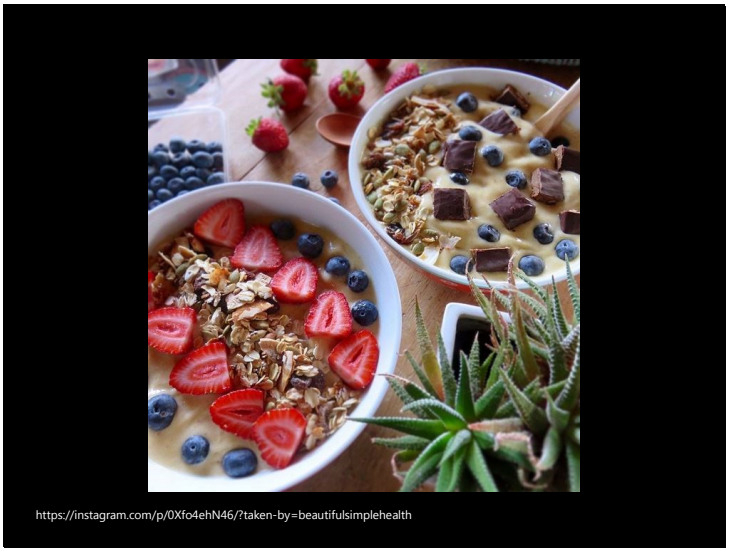


There have been several articles recently about people finding support for recovery from eating disorders on Instagram.

Slide 97

I found myself in the land of big salads.

Slide 98



And what some participants lovingly call “decorated mush”. (Usually oatmeal or smoothies in a bowl) Users post these photos of their healthy, vibrant meals to show their community that they are now developing a different relationship with food.

Slide 99

There are dozens of hashtags associated with these images. Some of them are cryptic.

Slide 100

Instagram introduced new guidelines against self-harm images and accounts in April 2012. Certain hashtags that promote eating disorders were disabled.

Slide 101

Other tags, such as #anorexia, are permitted, but users must click through a warning that the content may be graphic.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/instagram-bans-thinspiration-pro-eating-disorder-images/2012/04/24/gIQAXLeaeT_blog.html, http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/04/26/instagram-bans-thinspo-content/, http://blog.instagram.com/post/21454597658/instagrams-new-guidelines-against-self-harm]

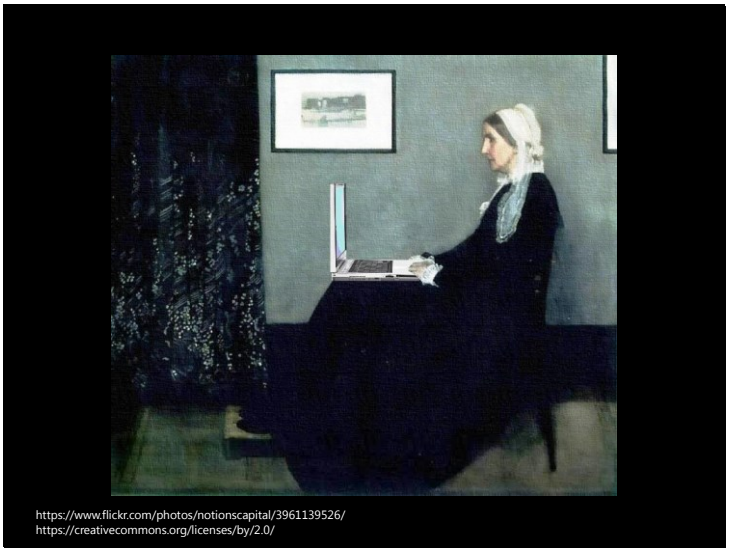
Slide 102

This doesn’t stop users from posting content that promotes eating disorders. Users just change their hashtags. They add letters, or substitute numbers for letters, to make alternative hashtags.

Slide 103

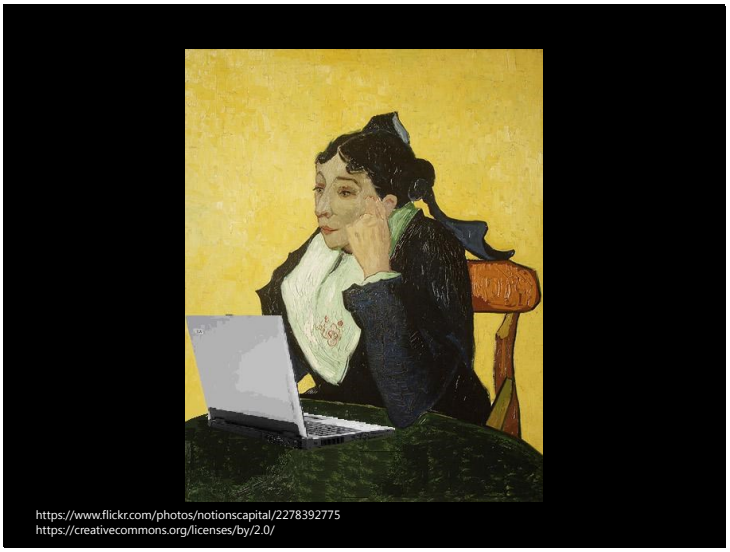
You need to know the hashtags to know if this is a picture of a recovery meal or not. It's not. This is a picture of a meal with a hashtag that is in favor of anorexia.

Slide 104



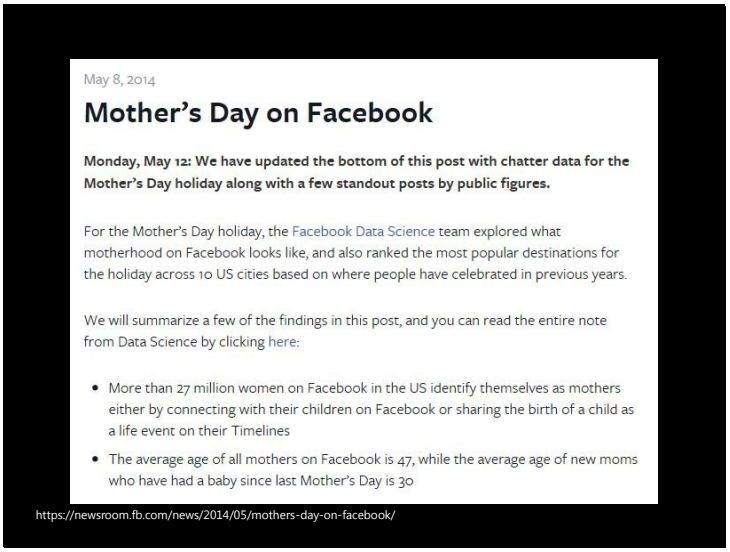
This poses yet another challenge to readers of the future. Not only will they have salads and decorated mush to explore, but they'll have to comprehend the hashtags – some of which are acronyms and therefore difficult to unpack – to understand what they are seeing.

Slide 105



So what should we do? First, we need to narrow our focus. I don't know about you, but if I hear the phrase 'big data' one more time, I'm going to throw up.

Slide 106


May 8, 2014
Mother's Day on Facebook
Monday, May 12: We have updated the bottom of this post with chatter data for the Mother's Day holiday along with a few standout posts by public figures.
For the Mother's Day holiday, the Facebook Data Science team explored what motherhood on Facebook looks like, and also ranked the most popular destinations for the holiday across 10 US cities based on where people have celebrated in previous years.
We will summarize a few of the findings in this post, and you can read the entire note from Data Science by clicking here:
More than 27 million women on Facebook in the US identify themselves as mothers either by connecting with their children on Facebook or sharing the birth of a child as a life event on their Timelines
The average age of all mothers on Facebook is 47, while the average age of new moms who have had a baby since last Mother's Day is 30
https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/05/mothers-day-on-facebook/

Unfortunately, that is where everyone's attention seems to be now. This is a Facebook Newsroom post about the Facebook Data Science team exploring what motherhood looked like on Mother's Day in 2014, with 27 million US women on Facebook identifying themselves as mothers. I'm not interested in 27 million mothers. But a few would be deeply fascinating.

Slide 107

If you look at media studies programs at universities, you'll see that analytics are becoming a major focus, so that students can learn how to make the most out of social media for marketing and communication. Yes, we're sending 200 billion tweets per year, but I don't care about most of them. I just want to focus on some of them. I don't care what the top 100 hashtags were last year; I just want to know the main ones used by my community.

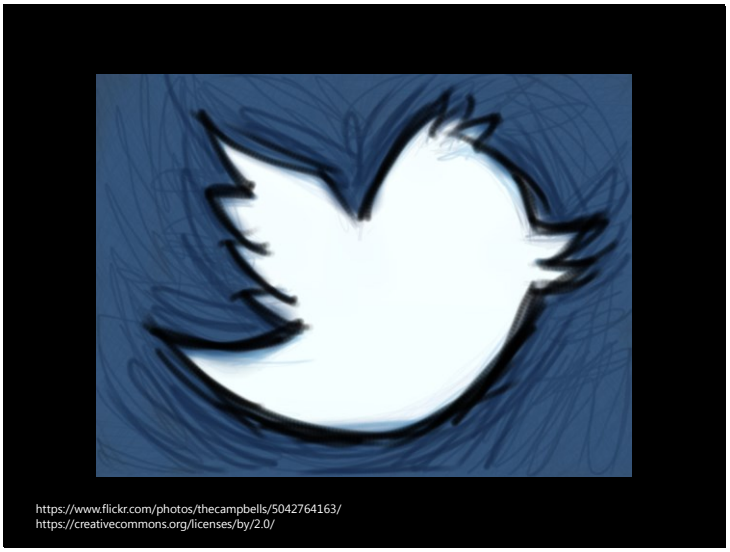
Slide 108

What I’m interested in is a much smaller scale – the stories of eating disorder recovery communities on Instagram.

Slide 109

The ways that individuals construct and present the self on Facebook.

Slide 110



The small-scale conversations that take place on Twitter.

Slide 111

The things that put ‘personal’ in ‘personal digital archiving’. So we need more of that small-scale description. If you intend to preserve your social media for the future, what sort of supporting information could you provide?

Slide 112

Part of this falls on our shoulders. We need to construct a ‘README’ file of our digital lives, to give context for the most important social forms that we used.

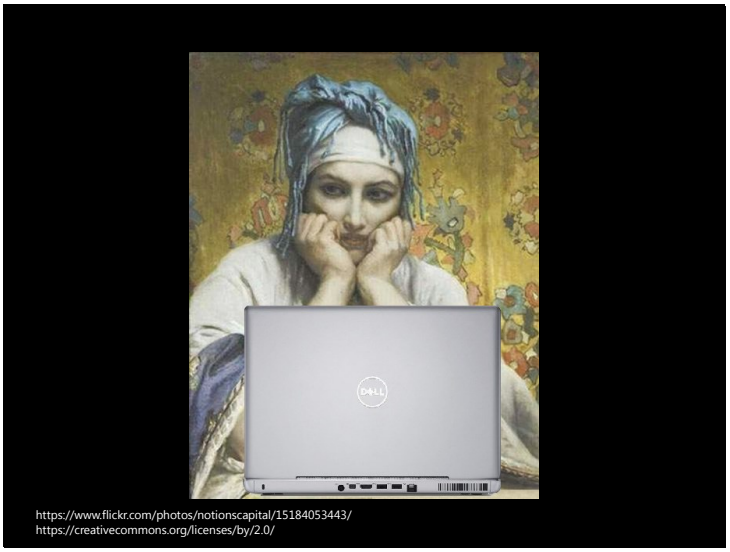
Slide 113

Second, since technological form and social form influence each other, we need to record as much of the history of technological change as we can. Sure, whenever Facebook tweaks something, there are viral articles about how stupid the new feature is.

Slide 114

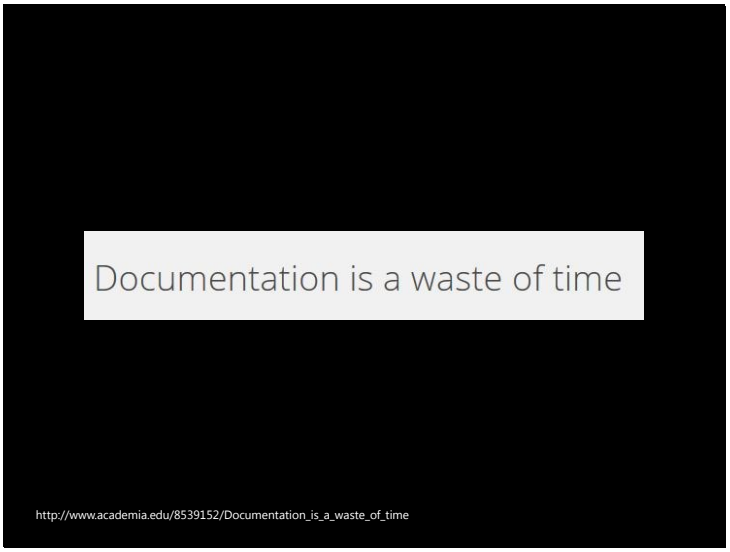
I’d prefer descriptions of the changes that are not written for click-bait.

Slide 115



Best of all would be if the companies themselves provided their own information about how their platforms change over time. Wouldn't it be cool if Facebook had a Timeline for itself? Or if Twitter had an account to tweet its own changes? Instagram might have to hard time doing it in their own platform, but if these companies blogged a record of their own changes, that would be enormously useful. They do announce SOME of their changes, but not all of them, and it would be useful to researchers if they made more of that information available publicly. Maybe they think that….

Slide 116



documentation is a waste of time. This is a hot idea in certain software development circles. But the really cool programmers say, well, you need to document, but only the stuff you'll need for your intended use. But if there is one consistent lesson I've learned working in libraries, archives, and museums…

Slide 117

it’s that when you build something for users, you have NO IDEA what uses they will find for it. You give them a technological form, and they imagine uses you never DREAMED of. So how exactly can you document for the intended use?

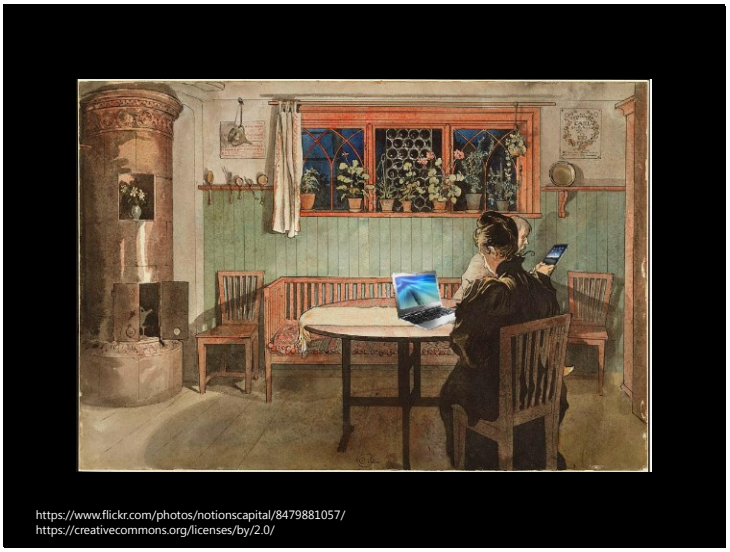
Slide 118

Technological AND personal documentation is the love letter we write to the future.

Slide 119

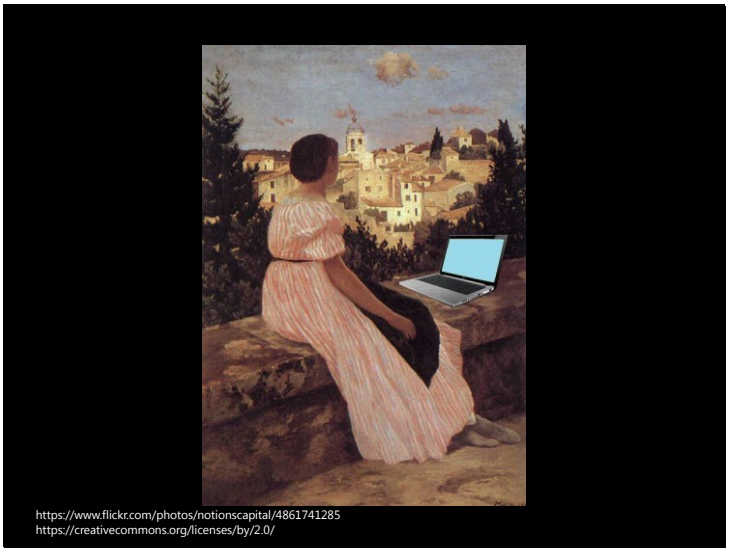
We want to pass on to future generations not just unknown weddings, but the stories of the people who had them.

Slide 120



Let’s talk about the personal. Let’s track the social and technological forms, before it all gets lost in the big data focus on marketing and sales.

Slide 121

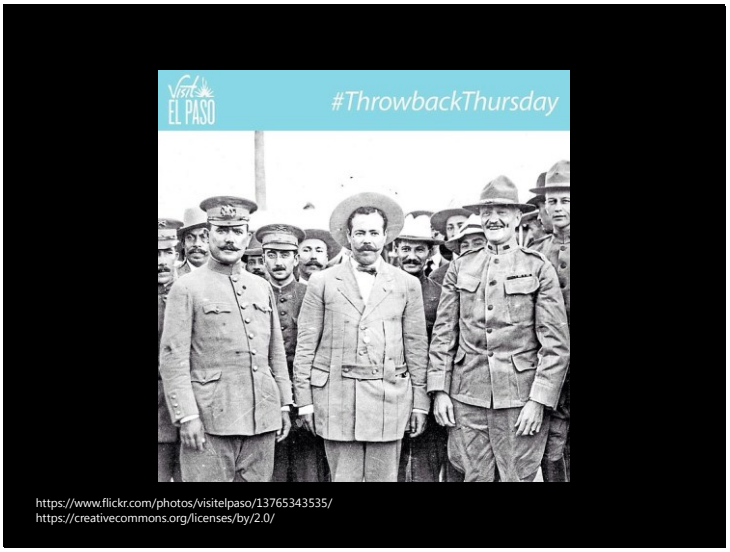


Let’s look off into the future and write things down, so we don’t just leave our descendants with data, but with context for lives played out in the digital world.

Slide 122

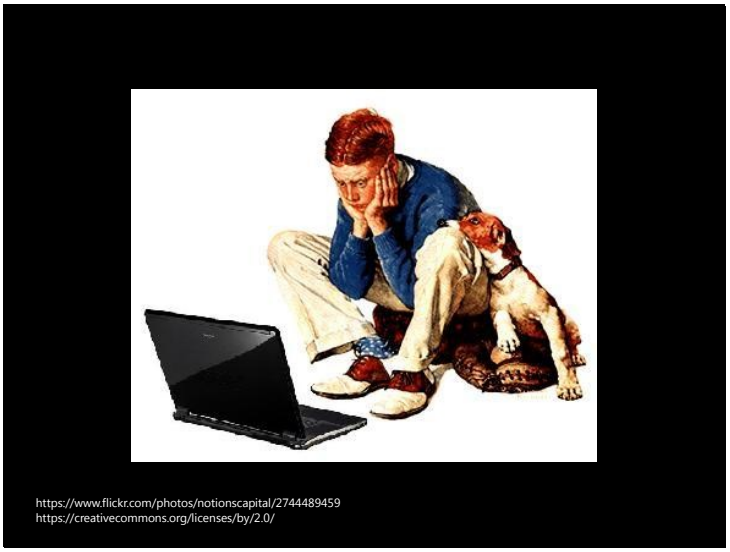
If your favorite thing is to post photos of diner food to Instagram, why not say so?

Slide 123



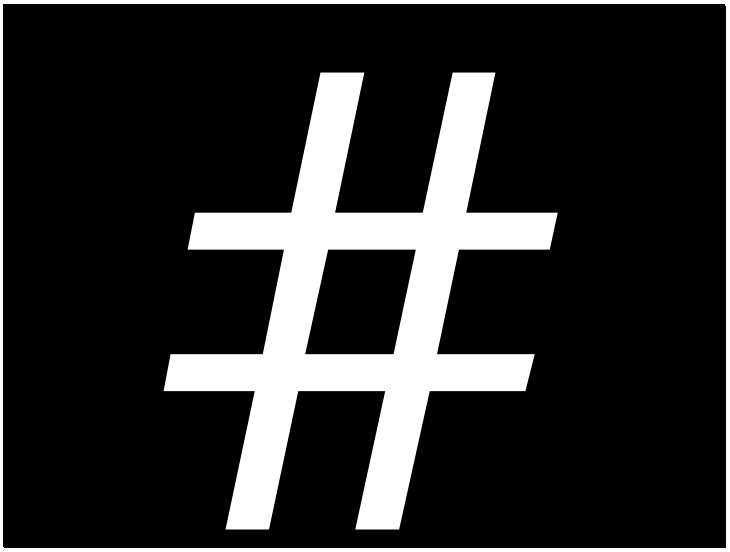
If you live for Throwback Thursday, why not say so?

Slide 124



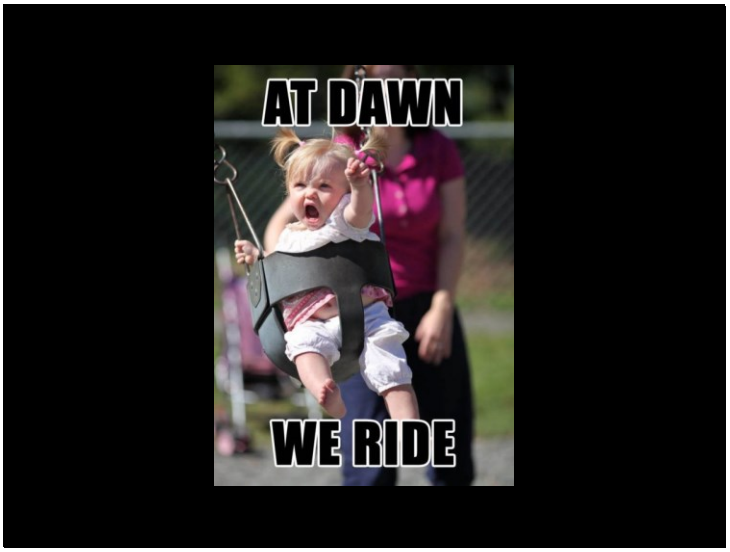
Let’s not miss the personal in digital archiving.

Slide 125



Let’s learn from the competing histories of the octothorpe – if you don’t document it, the story will be lost. Every time we see one of these symbols, let’s remember our rallying cry:

Slide 126



Technological documentation and personal README files! Our love letter to the future!

[Source unknown; this version comes from here:
https://40.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lp6j5u4fPg1qh89nro1_500.jpg]

Slide 127

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Thank You.